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Council committee to discuss embattled tuition assistance program

Employee perk not included in Leggett's proposed budget

by Erin Cunningham | Staff Writer

Montgomery County officials are currently reviewing many employee time sheets to determine whether workers received taxpayer money to attend training courses while they were on the clock, the director of the Office of Human Resources wrote in a memo.

Multiple layers of review also have been implemented to ensure that employees are using money they receive for tuition assistance in the appropriate way, Director Joseph Adler wrote in the March 19 memo to council members Duchy Trachtenberg and Philip M. Andrews.

Trachtenberg (D-At large) of North Bethesda and Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg chair the committees scheduled to take up the tuition assistance program Thursday.

From fiscal 2007 through Sept. 4, 2009, the county spent about \$2.4 million on 3,467 training courses for about 1,465 employees, according to a recent report from the county's inspector general.

That report, released earlier this month, will be discussed Thursday during a joint meeting of the County Council's Management and Fiscal Policy and Public Safety committees.

The tuition assistance program has been in the spotlight since it was revealed last year that police officers were using taxpayer money to attend training where they received deeply discounted guns.

The county filed a lawsuit March 3 to recoup money that went to that program.

Since the controversy arose, County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) suspended the tuition assistance program. The program was reinstated as of Dec. 15, but only for members of the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1994, Municipal and County Government Employees Organization.

MC GEO members continue to have access to the funds because they agreed to changes to the program. Police union members did not agree and are still banned from receiving the funds, Adler's memo states.

The tuition assistance program is a nonessential government program and should be cut from the county's budget, Andrews said Monday.

Police union officials have argued that officers should continue to receive funds because county officials — not officers — were the ones who mismanaged the program.

Andrews said it was possible that when the county's budget improved, a tuition assistance program could return.

"Tuition assistance programs are reasonable things to have as long as they're administered well and affordable, but right now they're not affordable," Andrews said.

The county has reviewed the program, is in the midst of an audit studying spending related to the program and has established a second level of management review for all applications for tuition assistance funding, Adler wrote.

The county also has created an electronic database of descriptions of courses county employees attended in fiscal years 2008 and 2009.

Police officers are undergoing a separate review, and Adler said his office has supported the police department's internal investigation to evaluate time sheets for all officers who received tuition assistance program money in fiscal years 2007, 2008 and 2009.

A sample of other government employees also is undergoing review, Adler's memo stated.